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The Last 30 Minutes

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Abstract

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The Last 30 Minutes

By Don R. Warden

Engineering, Senior

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A jeep whined in low gear as it pulled away from the M.P. checkpoint, out into the blackness, beyond the high chain-link fence, rolls of barbed wire, and watchtowers. The driver was Cambodian, a local national recently hired by the motor pool. Gears clanked, took hold with a jerk, growled with a high pitch due to his inexperience with the machine. Odell sat in the passenger seat, M-16 between his legs, fingers nervously stroking the barrel.

The driver reached into the pocket of his torn, faded shirt. "You want smoke G.I.?"

"Yeah, sure, thanks." Odell smoked very little. The taste of the foreign cigarettes repulsed him, but that night was different. It was the day after Christmas, he had been in-country for over eleven months, scheduled to return to the world in about four weeks. Things had been quiet at his base, very little trouble, no shellings at all, the supply depot where he was headed had experienced even less contact. However, during the previous Christmas season, the same depot had been raided, just before Odell had arrived. His company was assigned to secure the depot area in case of an alert, so as a precaution, several men had been put on guard duty. Odell was assigned to guard the Project "D" munitions warehouse on the midnight to four shift. The base commander did not want any incidents with the civilians to arise from mere precautions, the orders read ". . . no ammunition to be issued."

It was about three miles to the depot, down a single lane blacktop road. The smell of cut grass was whipped into Odell's nose, cool wind slapped his face as the jeep whined

down the narrow road where thick jungle grew right up to the shoulders. Odell shifted nervously in his seat, his mouth was very dry and full of bitter taste from the cigarette. He could not finish it, so extinguished it on the dashboard. His fingers trembled as he twisted the butt into the metal.

The jeep came to the top of a rise. Odell could see the flood lights of the depot, his right hand reached for the magazine pouch on his web belt. He had brought an empty magazine. If inserted into his weapon, no one could tell if he had ammo or not. As the jeep clipped along, he tried to piece together thoughts of his first Christmas away from home. It was only a few hours earlier that he'd been re-reading Mom's last letter, eating the cookies and stuffed dates she'd sent. He had lain in his bunk looking at a picture of the family: Mom, Dad, little Jim and Teri. His thoughts were interrupted when the driver asked him a question. "You have guard tonight, huh?"

Odell's eyes blinked, came to focus, he turned to reply. "Um, yeah, Project "D"."

"Oh, Project "D", number ten, man. You have much ammo, huh?"

"No ammo, they won't let us have any."

"Whaa, no ammo? How you kill anybody, use knife, huh?"

Odell did not answer, he gripped his rifle tightly with both hands as they approached the M.P. checkpoint at the depot. An officer was standing in the road, 45 slung from his side. Odell saluted as the jeep stopped. A cocky first lieutenant stuck his head inside the jeep. "Where you headed, specialist?"

"Project "D" sir, guard relief, midnight to four."

"You'd better get goin', specialist, you're late. You ain't got any ammo in that thing, do you?"

"No sir."

"Do you remember your general orders?"

Thoughts tumbled in Odell's mind. "Oh, ah, yes sir." He saluted quickly, the officer returned his as the jeep pulled away into the depot area. The warehouses and open storage areas were well lighted. Odell liked that, at least he'd be able to see clearly.

The Project "D" warehouse was in the middle of the depot, but almost a hundred yards from any of the other

buildings, next to the north fence, with thick jungle on the other side. As they drew near the warehouse, Odell could see Sergeant Fugitt leaning against a fence pole, rifle slung over his shoulder. When the jeep stopped, Odell fumbled with the latch of the safety harness; Sergeant Fugitt sauntered toward the jeep. "Come on, get outa there, I wanna get some sleep tonight."

Odell finally released the latch, jumped out quickly, almost dropping his rifle. Fugitt piled into the seat and ordered the driver to move out. Odell started to ask some questions. "Has it been pretty quiet? There hasn't been any . . . ," but before he could finish or get a reply, the jeep was cutting a U-turn, whining so loud his words were drowned out.

Odell stood alone, holding his rifle at his side, mouth hung open as he watched the jeep pull away. He returned to look at the warehouse which was not much bigger than a haybarn. There was only one flood light, on the north side, shooting onto several large crates piled on the ground, beyond was the perimeter fence. Odell walked around to the north side, in plain sight, pulled out an empty magazine, slammed it into his weapon, making as much noise as possible. If anyone was out there, the bluff might work. He began a slow walk around the building, holding his rifle with both hands, the butt under his right arm.

The area was quiet. Odell walked along the south side of the warehouse, in the darkness. There was no one around, no whining, rattling jeep to disturb him. Realization of his situation began to work on his mind. Just a few hours before he'd been dreaming of home, only a few weeks and he'd be there. It would still be winter, he'd see snow maybe.

He stopped at the southeast corner of the warehouse, he was sweating, his hands were clammy, less than four hours to go, but the early morning hours were the best times to expect trouble. If they would come, it would have to be silent, they'd sneak over the fence while he wasn't looking, jump from behind a crate while he passed by, slit his throat. He walked to the north end, he froze, staring at the chain-link fence. The flood light was no help. The metal fence acted like a screen, reflecting the light. They could sneak right up to the fence unnoticed, and . . .

Odell had to plot some strategy. "Don't get close to any

crates, leave ten feet of space around at all times, don't fall asleep."

He hadn't slept well before coming on duty, too much noise back at the barracks. He'd had three cups of strong coffee at the mess hall, but he still needed to keep moving. He checked his watch, quarter to one, time going fast. He decided that the best way to stay alert was to think about something else, it was so quiet he'd surely hear any movements. He'd walk briskly too, "don't give em a chance to get in."

Minutes ticked by, the air was gradually cooling, there was only the quiet. Caffeine made him high, blood tingled through his veins. The presence of danger only heightened the sensation. Next to combat it was the most critical time for which all G.I.s are disciplined, to perform guard duty. The strictest punishments had to do with breaches of expected performance while on guard duty. He was to give his life, if necessary.

By one-thirty, Odell was familiar with the area, still no movements out there. He had paused on the north side. His mouth was dry. He slung the weapon from his right shoulder and pulled out his canteen. The water was cool rushing down his throat, three large gulps would hold him. Screwing the lid on, he surveyed the fence line. A light flickered somewhere beyond, then disappeared. Odell dropped his canteen, dashed behind the nearest crate, weapon ready. He listened, nothing. He was sure he'd seen a fire light, like someone lighting a match. "Could it be a signal?" Moments passed, he was sweating at the brow and hands. "It might be a distraction. They could be sneaking in from the south side." Odell stood up, glanced quickly around, weapon held high. He proceeded to inspect the area. He stopped on the south side, in the dark. Nothing lay between him and the road except short grass and a barbed wire fence. He walked around to the north end. His canteen lay on the ground, water trickling out. He picked it up, tightened the lid, put it into the pouch on his belt. "I've just gotta play it cool, probably my imagination, but I shoulda just acted calm."

He resolved to put it all out of his mind, think about something else. He continued walking around the building, stopping occasionally to listen, or watch for movement. The cool air caused goose flesh on his neck and arms. He turned

up the collar of his fatigue shirt and rolled down his sleeves. An hour passed by unnoticed. Thoughts of home, plans for the future, all occupied his mind. The tingling sensations of the air and coffee were more powerful than ever. He was floating in a dreamland far removed from the realities of the Project "D" warehouse.

Passing beneath the floodlight on the north side, Odell heard a faint whine. It grew louder, approaching from the south side. As Odell circled the building, a jeep pulled into the area and stopped. The first lieutenant from the gate stepped out. Odell saluted.

"What have you got to report, specialist?"

"Nothing sir. I mean, it's been real quiet, nobody around."

"Okay, just stay on your toes for another half hour. You'll be relieved early. Some of my men are going to take over until dawn. I want fresh guards from here on. There's been . . . , well never mind, just stay alert 'til three."

"Yes sir." Odell saluted eagerly. Only thirty minutes, he'd be finished. He had the next day off anyway, so he'd get an extra hour of sleep, get up early, enjoy a full day of freedom, maybe write some letters home.

Odell was anxious, he continued to walk his beat, but fatigue was setting in. He wasn't as alert, the thought of a soft, warm bed pleased him. He was glancing at his watch frequently, but the last half hour was dragging by. He walked around the warehouse several time, then paused on the north side, shouldering his rifle, resting one foot on a crate, gazing at the fence beyond. His year was almost up. It would be nice to see the folks again, maybe go back to school, meet a girl. . . .

Odell's head rocked forward, he lost balance. Falling to the ground, lights were flashing, everything spinning. He heard the rifle clang against the crate at the instant he hit the ground. A warm sensation filled his body, then a pain in his head and neck. His right hand was near his face as he lay sprawled. He could barely make out the luminous second hand of his watch as it slowly swept an arc. Then the throbbing pain subsided, lights faded, a cold wind rushed over him.